The Fire Horse, First Aid to Melodrama, Will Soon Respond to His Last Alarm

E.A. WATERMAN PHOTO

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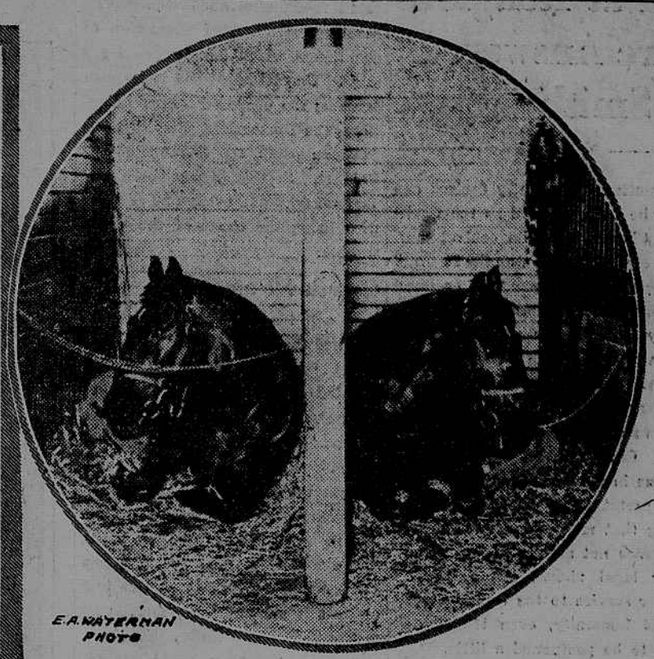

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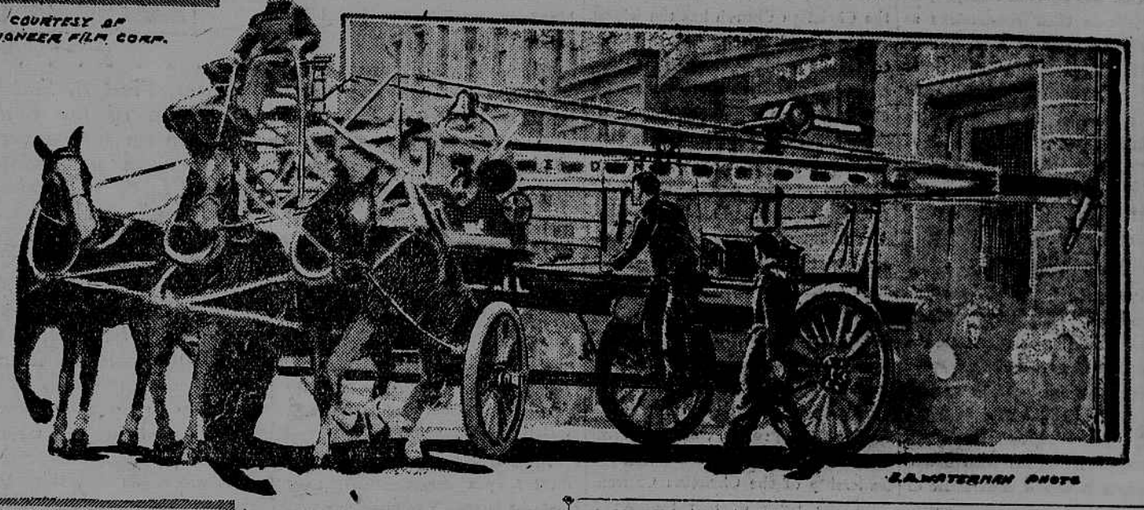

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In the upper left hand corner is Jerry, one of the few remaining fire horses; next is a movie reproduction of the famous scene from "The Still Alarm"; the recumbent horses are Jerry and Tom just before an alarm; below are shown a big New York blaze and a water tower just leaving its station

By Arnold D. Prince

DOES this remind you of anything?

The great city is asleep, even the policemen, seemingly, but devilry is afoot. The villain has stolen the papers and is seeking to carry his base designs still further by throwing suspicion on an innocent person. Suddenly there is a lurid glare in the sky.

Good heavens! The house in which the heroine is asleep, or imprisoned, or something, is on fire, and she, as well as the papers, is in danger of being incinerated.

Will no one save her?

Of course some one will. Scarcely has the first tongue of flame cast its sinister glow across the footlights than hoofs are heard. Out, out upon the stage thunders the fire engine, a real one, smoke belching from its funnel; the three gallant horses, nostrils flaring, strain madly at their collars; our hero, our brave hero himself—wasn't his name Leslie?—leans far out of the driver's seat, encouraging, coaxing, exhorting the brave steeds to still greater efforts; there is a veritable pandemonium of sound; men in the audience yank hysterically at the arms of their seats; women shriek, or scream, or sob, according to their inclination or temperament, and then—out of the falling cinders and burning debris stumbles our hero, with the heroine safe in his arms, and all is well.

Remember it? "The Still Alarm"! Of course. The first American play, so far as the oldest dramatic critic can recall, in which real fire-fighting apparatus was shown on the stage and the drama of saving life from a burning structure was vividly portrayed.

And how the memory of that ancient bit of stage realism, produced for the first time in the late '80s, persists through the years! What was it that Omar wrote?

"A Moment's Halt—a momentary taste
Of Being from the Well amid the Waste;
And, Lo! the phantom Caravan has reach'd
The Nothing it set out from."

Well, he was wrong. Memory outwits the clock every time, and all that those of us who are graying a bit at the temples and taking exercise daily to fight off the "octopus" of middle-aged flesh need to do to bring back that memorable fire scene is to close our eyes, and instantly the whole thing comes back—the crackle of the burning timbers, the wild cries, the flames, the rattle and crash of whirling wheels, the shrieking of the siren and the horses—especially the horses.

Yes, It Was Great

That was "some scene," if it be permitted to say so, and although it may be safe to burlesque it now, it would have been considered rank heresy by many people to have done so then, and mainly for the reason that the thing was not so much "acting" as it was a bit of real life, showing on the stage what actually might take place any day or night in any city which boasted of a paid fire department and real "up-to-date" horse-drawn, fire-fighting apparatus.

Among the thousands who saw and were thrilled by that memorable scene how many had not witnessed almost identical episodes in the streets of the city itself? How many, at the clang of the bell and the summons of the siren, had jumped quaking from their beds in the night and had watched from their windows the same kind of horses go sweeping past, straining desperately at their collars, on some such desperate mission as, divested of melodramatic features, was shown on the stage?

Surely the call that sent the fire horses to the fatal Windsor Hotel fire in Fifth Avenue in 1899 was equally tragic. Hundreds of similar occurrences were taking place yearly throughout the country, and blue-shirted heroes, riding behind gallant steeds, constantly were performing deeds which far eclipsed in valor that which won such tumultuous applause in "The Still Alarm." Why, one of the chief groups on the great Firemen's Monument on Riverside Drive is a "triple hitch" of New York horses, reproduced in stone from a photograph, responding to a disastrous fire in this city. The picture is even more graphic than the one shown in the play, as only one hoof of the three "flying" animals was on the ground when the camera caught them.

Now, however, the last bit of that life which was shown on the stage, and is so enduringly retained in the Firemen's Monument, is to disappear forever from the City of New York. The last of the fire horses are to go. Those still in service are to be sold at auction and the entire department is to be motorized. The few horses remaining in Manhattan are to be the first to go, possibly next month. Efficiency is the slogan of the day, and by the end of the present year the Fire Commissioner says not a single horse-drawn vehicle will remain in the department.

Well, of course, he is right; even the firemen who loved the horses as much as themselves say so. The city has grown great; the distances to be covered are long; speed is an essential factor in saving lives and property and fire horses no longer are equal to the task.

But tradition and custom die hard, no matter how closely pressed by progress, and there isn't a firehouse in the city but retains with jealous pride its quota of stories of the services that were performed by the courageous old quadrupeds.

Always Ready

Faithful and intelligent, they displayed a degree of understanding of their work that was always exciting astonishment. Trained in their duties as carefully as the firemen themselves, they were always ready to do their bit. A "coward" or a "slacker" was rare in the department. They would face all kinds of danger, many remaining faithfully at their posts even when the flames approached so close as to scorch their hides and burning embers fell all about them. In summer and winter, in sunshine or storm, when the pavements were icy or the mud up to their fetlocks, they were always the same, and at the signal would go swinging out of the stalls, ready to share with their masters whatever emergency might be awaiting them.

Stories of heroism among the animals are as numerous as those which dealt with their "almost human" qualities, and this one, among the many, will illustrate their ever-ready willingness to even lay down their lives at the call of duty:

One Christmas morning, several years ago, the alarm struck in one of the downtown engine houses in a quarter where the narrow streets were constantly crowded with men, women and children. Out dashed the big "triple hitch," hoofs flying and necks outstretched in their eagerness to be the first at the blaze. Around a corner two children playing in the street paid no heed to the alarm and the big animals were almost on top of them before the driver saw them.

What followed was such a frequent occurrence in the life of the department as almost to be a commonplace.

The driver, although realizing that death for him and his horses might be the alternative to striking the children, did not hesitate, and at his touch on the reins the big animals swung directly across the sidewalk into the wall of a building. Taking into account the general intelligence displayed by the horses in all other matters, it is not unreasonable to suppose that they understood the character of the obstruction into which they were heading, but if they did they did not falter any more than the man in the driver's seat, and in an instant they, as well as the reinsman, were dying on the sidewalk.

Probably no man in New York City knows more about the New York Fire Department than Dr. Harry M. Archer, of 72 West Eighty-second Street, for more than thirty-four years a volunteer worker at fires. He was recently made an honorary deputy fire chief in recognition of his services, and will tell you countless stories about the heroism of the old fire horses. There are a host of similar stories in the book written by Alfred M. Downs.

"Once during a fire in Hudson Street I saw about two hundred feet of blazing roof fall fifteen feet from some horses, but they never budged," Dr. Archer said. "Loyalty and courage were two of the predominant qualities among the beasts, and they rarely flinched when called to the test.

"Because of these and other qualities the animals almost invariably became great pets, loved alike by the firemen and by the children in the neighborhood.

"I do not know if it is true, but there were many horses in the department that were credited with knowing the signals. Of course, you know that each station house had its own call, although every alarm that was turned in from anywhere in the city was heard in every station house. These horses, it was claimed, always seemed to know whether they were among those to respond, or, in other words, that it was to be 'a go,' and when their signal sounded always responded more quickly than on other occasions."

Dr. Archer's house in West Eighty-second Street is filled with pictures of famous fire horses, old-time equipment and records of the companies, which made great pets of the animals.

No horses in the world received better treatment than did those in the Fire Department. The men took great pride in their accomplishments and became so attached to them that they and their officers frequently risked reprimand by neglecting to report those which became unfit for duty. Rigid rules were made to protect their health, and any violation resulted in swift punishment.

When the horses became unfit for duty they were sold at auction, but very frequently it happened that they were ultimately "knocked down" to some officer of the company or a friend of the department, who sent them to pasture at some place where they could pass the remainder of their lives in peace and comfort. One man in New York made it a regular practice to send a representative to the auction sales to buy up horses and then sent them to a large farm near Troy, where they remained until they died.

The Call of Duty

The fire horses that found their way into the hands of private owners never forgot their ancient calling, and it was no infrequent occurrence in New York to see one of the veterans, now hauling some huckster's wagon, go dashing off in the direction of a fire when his successors in service went sweeping past.

Some of the animals won special fame because of peculiar characteristics, and stories about these still survive, although they have long since gone the way of the car horse and other obsolete things.

One of these horses, named Big Jim, a splendid type, pure white in color, was attached to Hook and Ladder Company 23. Big Jim, like every other horse, occupied a stall across the front of which was a single chain which, when the alarm sounded, was released by a trip connecting with the shank of his halter. Early in his career Jim learned that by dropping his hoof gently he could release himself without waiting for the electric signal, and he quickly made use of this. Whenever he felt like having a drink of water he would touch the trip and march slowly to the sink at the rear of the house, where he would take his fill.

Being a kindly and a generous beast, he "decided not to be selfish about it," as Mr. Downs writes in his book, "and the next day the men found him releasing himself and then going to the next stall and performing the same office for Jerry, his mate.

"The two horses," Mr. Downs goes on, "would stand together as though in actual consultation until Jim got ready to retire to his stall or was ordered back."

Equally famous was Baby, a steel gray horse attached to Engine Company 2. Baby was one of those earnest and conscientious workers who would go to unusual lengths to perform his duty, and the firemen always insisted that when at any time the chain in front of his stall failed to trip he would "crouch down on his stomach" and crawl under the barrier.

Baby, it would appear, was also a great handshaker and would willingly offer his hoof to any person, young or old, who invited him to do so.

Many of the horses in the department were noted for their fondness for sugar, but there was one animal, Roger, named after Roger Connor, the famous first baseman of the old New York Baseball Club, who developed an astonishing appetite for soft-shell crabs. Roger was on duty with Engine Company 21 and acquired the habit when a peddler sold two of the shellfish to one of the firemen. This individual seasoned the crabs nicely with sauce, pepper and salt, but, being suddenly summoned to the back of the house, incautiously laid the edibles on the footboard of the engine. On his return he was amazed, and somewhat exasperated, to discover that Roger had eaten his lunch, and from that time the animal became incurably addicted to the food, which had to be provided for him at regular intervals. Moreover, having thrown off all restraint, as it were, Roger also developed a fondness for all sorts of meat sandwiches, as well as for hot tea, onions, scallops and vegetables, and after dining would always show his appreciation by offering to shake hands with any one who happened to be near his stall.

Roger won a great deal of fame because of these gastronomic accomplishments, but the time came when his courage also was called to the test, and then he proved that his weakness for strange viands had had no effect whatever upon his dependability. A call coming from a fire on the East Side, Roger and his two mates soon found themselves in the midst of dense clouds of smoke and steam which even the most seasoned of the men found almost impossible to endure. Generally at fires of considerable duration one of the first acts of the firemen was to unhitch the horses and lead them to a place of safety, but on this occasion the flames made such rapid headway that all their efforts had to be devoted to curbing the conflagration.

Giant tongues of flame came so close they bit into Roger's hide, but although his mates, who were also burned, reared and plunged in agony, he held his ground until finally the firemen had time to release him. Back at the station house he was found to have received several terrible burns, but endured the pain as stoically as might any of the men, who would have considered it a sign of weakness to complain of their suffering.

In consequence of this heroism Roger thereafter enjoyed special privileges, and would be permitted to walk up and down the street alone whenever there was an opportunity. Roger seemed to appreciate these outings greatly and never took advantage of them. He never strayed off the block in which the firehouse was situated, and if an alarm came in he would promptly dash back to his quarters and take his place without loss of time as the center horse of the hitch.

Disciplining Old Jim

Another famous horse was Old Jim of No. 33, a strawberry roan, who was a tower of strength and reliability at a fire, but who had a bad habit of kicking his post stall at meal times. He would keep battering away until he got his food, and it was feared that he might do himself some injury unless the habit was checked. So a horse trainer was consulted and he advised that the men tie a clothesline around the forefoot with which Old Jim did not do his kicking. The moment he began to strike with the other foot the line was to be jerked, thus throwing the horse to his knees. The thing worked as planned, and although Old Jim was very much surprised he was not to be cured so easily. Thereafter he did not do any kicking until he had first carefully examined the ground to see that the hobble was not there, after which he would hammer the post as lustily as before.

This went on for some time, to the despair of the men, until one of them finally hit on the scheme of hiding at one side of the stall until Old Jim had finished his examination and then quietly adjusting the hobble. Once again was Old Jim jerked off his feet, and evidently he came to the conclusion that there was no use in combating such devilish ingenuity as this, for after rising to his feet he never again rapped on the stall post at meal time.

Books could be filled with similar stories about other famous horses which at one time or another were in the service of the Fire Department of New York City. Engine Company 39 had a dapple roan called Bull who was not only a marvelous animal in the harness, but also such a stickler for procedure and precedence that he would not allow any man to board the wagon until his collar had been properly snapped on, and the captain of the company told of one instance when the animal deliberately turned and tore the coat off a man who attempted to vary this routine.

At Engine Company 14 you will hear many stories about old Major, who would "cough to show that he was ill," dance at a moment's invitation, shake hands, or do several other tricks which made him a great favorite with the children in the neighborhood. And they will tell you an entirely different crop of stories at Hook and Ladder 15, where "Nigger, the Devil of the Fire Department," was stationed, and where, despite an unlovely predilection for biting, he won general admiration because of his giant strength and speed when going to fires.

Jerry One of the Last

Other famous horses could be mentioned, but as the city kept getting bigger and bigger even their powers, great as they were, began to prove unequal to the task, and finally, about ten years ago, the city began to motorize the department, a work now being carried on by Hubert J. Treacy, head of the Bureau of Repairs and Supplies.

Now only a few of the fire horses remain in Manhattan, the oldest being Jerry, at Engine Company 53, whose running mate, of course, is named Tom. Jerry is a great favorite among the men, and Jim Robinson, one of the firemen stationed there, has announced his intention of trying to buy him when the auction takes place.

"If I get him, I'll send him to my brother's farm in Dutchess County, where he can get all the feed he wants and live the rest of his life in peace," said Robinson.

Two of the other horses still on duty in Manhattan are at Engine Company 47, and four others are at Engine Company 76.

Some others are scattered about the outlying districts of Manhattan and the other boroughs, and when these are gone the end of the chapter of horse-drawn equipment in this city will have been reached.

The age which produced "The Still Alarm" and the thrills that went with it will have been brought to a close.

Vale, old fire horse! Pax vobiscum! May there be no fires to cover where you go to from here.